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Libraries and Sustainability in Developing Countries: Leadership Models Based on Three Successful Organizations

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine leadership styles highly effective in building sustainable libraries in developing countries. The author studies the leadership of three organizations: Room to Read, Central Asia Institute (CAI), and the Hester J. Hodgdon (HJH) Libraries for All Program, each focusing to some extent on libraries and literacy in developing countries. Following a review of the history of sustainability in the library community, aspects of Andy Hargreaves' and Dean Fink's principles of sustainable leadership are referenced in an analysis of the leadership styles found in these organizations. The author concludes that, although Room to Read, CAI, and HJH Libraries for All Program were not founded by librarians, their successful modes of leadership represent collaborative initiatives that help build sustainable communities and offer models of leadership for the profession of librarianship.

Introduction

The information age with its exponential growth in communication technologies presents new opportunities for libraries to become gateways to global information networks and for libraries more dramatically to become agencies of community sustainability. This requires librarians, more than ever before, to promote information literacy – those skills required to access and process relevant information.¹ It also requires librarians to develop strong leadership and managerial skills.² Today, however, recent economic conditions have led to double-digit growth in public library attendance in the United States while simultaneously resulting in declining budgets, decreased staffing level, and fewer service hours.³ As this is true for the United States with its strong democratic commitments, principles and institutions, how much more urgent is the need to see libraries find a similar role within developing countries? While the challenges are daunting, public libraries still strive to flourish as intellectual and cultural institutions that promote community sustainability and development by enhancing the quality of life of its individual members.

The essence of the public library remains as true today as it was some decades earlier

when Librarian of Congress, Daniel J. Boorstin asserted that, "Libraries remain the mecca of self-help, the most open of open universities ... where there are no entrance exams and no diplomas, and where one can enter at any age."⁴ During the American Library Association's (ALA) 2008 Annual Conference, keynote speaker and civil rights leader, Vernon Jordan, stated that the American people are looking for leadership and authenticity. He further noted that it is the library profession that extols this type of leadership. "Librarians ... you open our citizenry to life through books."⁵ In upholding the principle that democracy depends on an informed population that moves communities along the path of sustainability, especially during these challenging economic times librarians must be positioned as community leaders that exhibit strong and effective leadership styles and management practices.

The purpose of this article is to examine the leadership styles found in three nonprofit organizations that establish and/or support libraries in developing countries: Room to Read, Central Asia Institute, and the Hester J. Hodgdon (HJH) Libraries for All Program. Each of these organizations was founded by leaders who did not have a professional background in librarianship. Their work however, has positioned them as effective

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leaders in library development and community sustainability. In fact, the American Library Association presented the founder of Room to Read and the director of Hester J. Hodgdon Libraries for All Program with the prestigious ALA Presidential Citation for International Innovation in 2008 and 2009, respectively. As exemplars for the library profession, what can librarians learn from the leaders of Room to Read, HJH and CAI about creating effective library organizations that support community sustainability?

History of Sustainable Development and Impact on the Library Community

First, what is meant by “sustainable development”? As Cheever and Campbell-Mohn explain, “Sustainable development is an approach to economic planning to attempt to foster economic growth while preserving the quality of the environment for future generations.”⁶ An early articulation of the concept occurred at the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, where representatives from 113 countries and 19 inter-government agencies and nongovernmental organizations raised awareness of the issues from the local level to global concern.⁷ During the last decades of the twentieth century, the concern for sustainable development grew tremendously throughout the world.

Two key events established key issues of sustainable development as pivotal for our time. In 1984, under the auspice of the United Nations, the World Commission on Environment and Development published a report, *Our Common Future*, that explained the inter-connectivity of community development and spelled out the threats to, and need for, sustainable growth. Then again at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the 1992 Earth Summit) in Rio de Janeiro, Agenda 21 articulated a clear and meaningful definition of sustainable development.⁸

To understand the librarian’s role in sustainable community development, various affirmations and initiatives in fostering sustaina-

bility on a community level come to mind. In the United States, the library is considered one of the strongest democratic institutions having at its core the principle that access to information and knowledge is a right guaranteed to all. It is the role of the librarian to work within the community to make sure this right is realized.⁹ Sharpening the focus of this principle, the American Library Association embraced the concept of sustainable development, and in particular saw the Association as a catalyst to foster community development. In 1999, the theme of Sarah Long’s ALA presidency was “Libraries Build Community.” During her tenure, ALA partnered with Global Learning, Inc. of New Jersey and received a \$300,000 grant from the U.S. Agency for International Development. That led to the creation of the project, Libraries Build Sustainable Communities (LBSC) whose purpose was to teach librarians about the concepts and issues of sustainability and to support librarians as builders of sustainable communities. Librarians were encouraged to actively engage with community leaders in fostering community plans and development. The good work of the LBSC initiative, in fact, received special recognition in 2001 by the Center of Excellence for Sustainable Development and the U.S. Department of Energy’s Energy Efficiency and the National Council for Science and the Environment (NCSE).

Over the past decade, the role of libraries and librarians in promoting sustainable development has become clearer. The NCSE, presenting at the 2002 United Nations World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), defined this emerging role of libraries in terms of 1) fostering collaborative partnerships, 2) increasing community awareness, and 3) directing the energies of library organizations in supporting sustainability. There are some directives librarians can glean from this definition.

Regarding partnerships, libraries and information providers are encouraged actively to engage in linking information sources and information consumers. Librarians are seen as valued partners in planning and imple-

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menting sustainability initiatives and actions at local, national, and international levels. Librarians should help facilitate the exchange of information so crucially important in assisting community leaders in decision-making processes and in moving their communities towards sustainable development.

Regarding awareness, libraries and librarians should be encouraged to create learning environments focused on all matters concerning sustainability itself. These environments should be well suited to the specific communities they serve. On a basic level, information and communication technologies should be made available through libraries, and librarians should be skilled in their use and be able to instruct (and thus empower) others in their use.

Regarding the role of library networks and organizations, the WSSD applauded the use of library networks and programs such as LBSC.¹⁰ The WSSD also regards the existing international networking capacities of IFLA, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, as a conduit for understanding, promoting and implementing sustainable programs.¹¹ As a case in point, Libraries Build Sustainable Communities involved librarians, publishers, and vendors in forty-five projects. Among the projects supported was the restoration of the Alvar Branch, one small library in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans.¹² In a report delivered at the 2006 ALA Annual Conference, more than 900 librarians helped to rebuild the New Orleans Public Library following the Katrina hurricane disaster that left eight of its 13 branches under water, with a total of \$18 million in losses.¹³ Librarians are encouraged to follow this example by marshalling support, initiating programs, volunteering time and effort in concrete projects and programs that build and re-build sustainable communities.

In a similar vein to ALA, but on a broader scale, IFLA, as an organization that represents the global voice of the library and information profession, identifies its core values as:

1. the endorsement of the principles of freedom of access to information, ideas, and works of imagination and freedom of expression embodied in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
2. the belief that people, communities, and organizations need universal and equitable access to information, ideas, and works of imagination for their social, educational, cultural, democratic, and economic well-being;
3. the conviction that delivery of high-quality library and information services helps guarantee that access;
4. the commitment to enable all members of the Federation to engage in, and benefit from, its activities without regard to citizenship, disability, ethnic origin, gender, geographical location, language, political philosophy, race, or religion.¹⁴

As the information age evolves with new dimensions of human development emerging, and as the need to build sustainable communities becomes ever more urgent, IFLA, along with ALA, and in lockstep with various other national and international organizations, conferences and summits, makes it abundantly clear that libraries and librarians can and should take a leadership role by forming collaborative partnerships to help develop and implement policies and programs that create sustainable communities.¹⁵ There are many examples of library involvement that demonstrate the importance and effect libraries have in the life of communities and in moving them towards sustainability. Three in particular are compelling examples of how library support of sustainability is attained.

Programmatic Organizations

As a result of this growing movement toward building sustainable communities and the NCSE's recommendations regarding the role of libraries and librarians, many nonprofit, for-profit, and government organizations have emerged to support libraries in devel-

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oping countries. Following a brief profile of three successful nonprofit organizations – Room to Read, Central Asia Institute, and the Hester J. Hodgdon (HJH) Libraries for All Program – the leadership principles at play in their operations will be examined. Each of these organizations has contributed significantly to community building over the past ten years, in mitigating the plight of the poor, in implementing effective literacy programs, and in encouraging gender equality in education.

Room to Read

Established in 2000, now celebrating its tenth anniversary, Room to Read, a San Francisco-based nonprofit organization, promotes literacy in Asia (particularly in Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Laos, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam) and in Africa (mainly in South Africa and Zambia). Room to Read reports that over the past decade, its employees and volunteers have built 1,129 schools and established 9,220 bilingual libraries. It has distributed 7.4 million books, sent 8,770 girls to school on scholarships through their Girls' Education program, and trained 6,800 teachers, principals, and librarians. To date, more than four million children have benefited, and by 2015, the goal is to reach 10 million with Room to Read's lifelong gift of education.¹⁶

Central Asia Institute

Central Asia Institute (CAI) was founded in 1996 to promote and provide community-based education and literacy programs, especially for girls, in remote mountain regions of Central Asia. It has produced programs and provided services in areas of general education, women's education, public health and conservation. In the field of education, CAI has established more than 136 schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan that provide education to approximately 51,000 students, and has created a porter-training program and conducts teacher education workshops. While not a library-centered organization *per se*, the provision of relevant information is crucial to its educational projects such as the

women's vocational centers that offer training in infant oral rehydration, maternal health care and optometry. Along with public health and conservation programs, potable water projects have been created to provide water filtration and latrine systems.¹⁷ To support its educational initiatives, various fundraising efforts have been launched, such as Pennies for Peace, a service-learning program designed to educate American children and engage communities in the United States in making a positive impact on a global scale – one penny at a time. In recognition of its good work, Pennies for Peace was recipient of the 2009 Mom's Choice Award.

HJH Libraries for All Program

HJH Libraries for All Program began in 2001 by organizing and promoting fundraising activities to support the San Juan del Sur Biblioteca Movil (SDJS Biblioteca) – the first public lending library in Nicaragua. Currently, there are 5,000 registered patrons and a circulating collection of nine thousand books in Spanish and English. Since the beginning, the primary purpose of this organization and its libraries is to expand information and learning opportunities to communities throughout Nicaragua and in other Central American countries. Driven by volunteer workers, HJH Libraries for All Program maintains and supports educational, language, and literacy programs through its unique donation program, "Library in a Box," a program in partnership with the U.S. Peace Corps libraries. In 2003, the HJH Libraries for All Program began Proyecto Móvil that quickly has expanded to more than 20 communities.

San Juan del Sur Biblioteca Movil now has become an international operation offering educational exchanges for graduate students in library and information sciences. An important aspect of its library education program, in July 2005, Boston's Simmons Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS) and San Juan del Sur Biblioteca Móvil hosted the first conference of Nicaraguan librarians in San Juan del Sur offering workshops on storytelling, book repair, cata-

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logging, and collection development.¹⁸ In January 2009, SDJS Biblioteca hosted the first study abroad for-credit course for library science students from the University of Maryland's "iSchool." Three programs are scheduled to begin in early 2010 with the Simmons GSLIS program, University of Maryland's iSchool, and LaSalle College Learning Abroad program. In addition, the HJH Libraries for All Program has partnered with ANIBIPA, the Nicaraguan Library Association, to provide training workshops at the annual ANIBIPA conferences.¹⁹

The remarkable success of these three organizations blends tightly together and builds on collaboration, libraries and education that lead to sustainable community development. Such success can be traced to leaders who model qualities to which all librarians can aspire.

Key Leadership Principles

John Wood, founder of Room to Read; Greg Mortenson, Director of the Central Asia Institute; and Jane Mirandette, Directora of the HJH Libraries for All Program have become noted figures in today's struggle to end global illiteracy and create sustainable communities. Passion is the constant heartbeat and the pivotal driving force behind their visionary leadership. A strong sense of social justice grounding their work and philosophy is central to their organizations and, interestingly enough, a core value that stems from one defining moment in their lives. For Wood, a former executive at Microsoft, the defining moment came while hiking in Nepal and a happenstance opportunity to visit an impoverished school.²⁰ For Mortenson, one such moment came when being nursed back to health by the Baltic villagers of Korphe following an unsuccessful attempt in 1993 to climb K2. Driven by a desire to "give back," Mortenson subsequently embarked on his adventure to promote secular education in the remote underserved mountain communities of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Kyrgyzstan, and across the steppes of Mongolia.²¹ In 1991, on the patio of her hotel, the Villa Isabella in San Juan del Sur, Nicaragua, Miran-

dette, appalled by the lack of books and information resources in the region, developed a plan to change the situation and create the first public lending library in the country.²²

What makes these leaders great is that they were able to transform defining moments, their "aha" experiences, into passion to change some part of the world. Experiences and visions of these leaders were transformed into organizations infused with values that move individuals, one by one, and collectively, along the path of community development and sustainability. In effect, for these leaders, the mission statements of their organizations are regarded as effective *value* statements that are truly meaningful in driving their work. Room to Read's mission statement reflects and incorporates a key component of sustainability, namely, creating partnerships by empowering individuals in the country to better themselves through education. It declares, "Room to Read seeks to transform the lives of millions of children in developing countries by focusing on literacy and gender equality in education. Working in collaboration with local communities, partner organizations and governments, we develop literacy skills and a habit of reading among primary school children, and support girls to complete secondary school with the relevant life skills to succeed in school and beyond."²³ With such a mission, vision can become reality. A prime example is the Himalaya Primary School, located on the outskirts of Kathmandu, where local brick factories donated 10,000 bricks and Room to Read's funding was used to buy cement, window frames and desks, and to pay for skilled labor needed for construction.

For Central Asia Institute, the essence of their mission embodies the aphorism "Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach him to fish and he will eat for a lifetime."²⁴ In a manner similar to Wood, Mortenson has led this organization in a way that provides project funding but also engages the labor and commitment of a community. Each of its projects matches project funds with dollar amounts raised in a community designated for local labor and resources. Moreover, to

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ensure success, a committee of local people is selected to take part in three phases of any given project: planning, implementing, and evaluating. The effect is at least two-fold: realizing the benefits of the project itself and also creating a base of management experience within the community.

Unlike Room to Read and CAI, the HJH Libraries for All Program does not require a community to match project funds. Instead, under the direction of the Program's Board of Directors and with input from volunteers, the HJH Libraries for All Program organizes and promotes fundraising activities, largely in the United States, in support of the goals and activities to expand community-based lending libraries throughout Nicaragua and in other Central American countries. Essentially a fund-raising organization, HJH Libraries for All Program hires local people to manage community libraries.

More specifically, in terms of management theory, it appears that Selznick's²⁵ value-based administrative principles undergird, either explicitly or implicitly, the approach of Wood, Mortenson and Mirandette. Their leadership styles also reflect a basic principle of "sustainable leadership" elucidated by Hargreaves and Fink²⁶, namely, that sustainable leadership begins with a moral purpose. By establishing clear goals and effectively communicating them, these leaders successfully involved others and built united team partnerships. It is clear from CAI's mission statement that the organization's success stems from Mortenson's passionate desire to create an organization infused with values informed by cross-cultural exchange. To implement this approach, Mortenson sought to build trust among the Pakistani tribes. Engaging village leaders in meaningful ways that address their needs and desires, he gained the respect of Islamic tribal leaders simply by listening and showing respect for their culture. In fact, Mortenson feels that the local community has more to teach outsiders than what outsiders could ever teach them.²⁷

It appears this team-building, collaborative decision-making leadership style was more

difficult for Wood. In the early days, he made all the decisions. For example, as Room to Read began to take shape, while growth was accelerating at an impressive pace, Wood realized that funding did not support the rapid growth in human resources. Although he felt the need to reduce the workforce, his team disagreed. After a difficult process of evaluation and discernment, Wood decided to listen to his team, those practitioners "in the field," and the higher numbers were maintained. In retrospect, this was the right thing to do.²⁸ One of the lessons learned was the importance of encouraging employees to challenge the thinking of the leaders. Most recently, this newly learned lesson was put to the test as the organization entered its second decade and launched a thoroughgoing process of strategic planning, a process that included collaborative and comprehensive reflections and discussions of stakeholders representing its regional, national and international offices, as well as advisers and supporters, their Board of Directors, donors, and experts in the field of international education.²⁹

The collaborative, consultative approach also undergirds the work of HJH Libraries for All Program. Prior to opening the first lending library, Mirandette conducted introductory meetings with twenty-five community leaders and educators to discuss the possibilities of a mobile library project. Setting the stage this way, she continues to build lasting partnerships within the international library community. Over the course of the past five years, Mirandette has established herself as a leader who reaches out to others in a variety of ways. Recent presentations at the "International Relations Roundtable" at ALA Annual Conventions saw Mirandette encourage librarians to become part of the volunteer program offered by HJH. Since 2005, the Simmons-HJH partnership has become an effective, vibrant student practicum program for library and information science students.³⁰ Through her collaborative work in establishing training workshops, and with a strong contingent of volunteers, Mirandette exhibits a commitment to support sustainable

communities through strong libraries throughout Central America.

It is evident that within these organizations decision making is not limited to its leaders — Wood, Mortenson, or Mirandette — but, in fact, is distributed throughout the various organizational layers, and includes members of the communities they serve. By distributing leadership tasks and responsibilities, not only have these organizations achieved the decisions needed to move their operations forward, these leaders also have adopted forward thinking that entertains supportable future directions for their respective organizations. By participating in decision making, middle managers and field workers are introduced to and learn the managerial operations of the organization. In this way, Wood, Mortenson and Mirandette exhibit the second principle of Hargreaves and Fink's theory, namely, that effective leadership focuses on succession planning in order to ensure that the shared vision continues after "the principal" is gone.³¹ Wood, Mortenson, and Mirandette possess characteristics of truly collaborative, effective leaders as presented by some management theorists. Although their organizations are relatively new, these leaders have accomplished much in realizing their compelling visions for literacy and in advancing sustainable communities."³²

As effective leaders, Wood, Mortenson, and Mirandette engage in self-awareness and organizational management that exhibit social responsibility rooted in relationship building. These qualities profoundly affect all aspects of their organizations. Hargreaves and Fink describe this type of leadership as, "Sustainable leadership [that] develops and does not deplete material and human resources. It renews people's energy. Sustainable leadership is prudent and resourceful leadership that wastes neither its money nor its people."³³ Each of these organizations engages a management model that understands the community as a whole and that it must be involved and empowered toward the vision.

Conclusion

Sociologist Amitai Etzioni suggests, "Think of societies as communities of communities."³⁴ As such, a community contributes to a society through its dynamic organizational life with its web of affect-laden relationships extending throughout groups of individuals, where relationships crisscross and reinforce each other. One wonders today whether there is an institution better suited than the public library in which to foster these core values and principles — principles that support community development and sustainability. It is through the efforts of organizations with leaders like Wood, Mortenson and Mirandette that we see the importance of the guiding principles of leadership at work in shaping and defining the democratization of societies and in moving communities along the path to sustainability.

There is no question that the need for sustainable communities and effective libraries remains urgent. At the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, Ronald Bailey reported that worldwide, 1.1 billion people lack safe drinking water, 2.2 billion people are without adequate sanitation, 2.5 billion people have no access to modern energy services, 11 million children under the age of five years die each year in developing countries from preventable diseases. Eight hundred million people are malnourished, despite a global abundance food.³⁵ Could the need be more dire and the challenges more daunting? To meet these challenges, leadership models such as those discussed here can help foster the emergence and development of sustainable communities. While a fuller treatment of the issue of library leadership would include a more in-depth critique of the work and challenges of Wood, Mortenson, Mirandette and others, and would also explore the abundant literature on management theory that addresses collaboration and related matters, the fact remains that a meaningful collaborative leadership style brings results. It is our duty as information specialists to engage actively in cooperative projects and work toward the betterment of society.

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Although Room to Read, CAI, and HJH Libraries for All Program were not founded by librarians, their successful leadership practices serve as guides and models for our profession. In *The Right Mountain: Lessons from Everest on the Real Meaning of Success*, Jim Hayhurst defines true success as the attainment of purpose without compromising core values.³⁶ In my opinion, based on the accomplishments of these organizations, success can be further defined as a practical melding of the individual leader's core values and the core values of those they lead. Leadership styles, grounded in passion, meaningful engagement, team building and collaborative management practices, as well as reasonable risk taking, self-awareness and social responsibility, together, serve to nurture the spirit and legacy of sustainable organizations and communities.

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